



OAK ZESTY **FIRM** *prestige* SOFT TANNINS  
 great in the air **stronger fruits** COMPLEX **BUTTERY**  
 consistently good *smooth* **sunny climate** harmony  
 first class fizz

# Sip of success

Which airlines serve the finest in-flight wines? Rose Dykins reveals the winners of our annual awards

It's time to crack open a bottle and celebrate. After tasting 250 wines from 28 airlines, our expert judges have picked the winners of the 2013 *Business Traveller* Cellars in the Sky Awards, presented to the carriers that served the best onboard wine last year.

Head judge Charles Metcalfe, co-chairman of the International Wine Challenge and food and wine matching guru, handed out trophies at a well-attended reception on February 3 at London's historic Trinity House ([trinityhouse.co.uk/events](http://trinityhouse.co.uk/events)), with catering from Chamberlain's – our thanks to Trinity House for providing the perfect venue. We also held wine tastings at the Business Travel Show in Earls Court on February 4-5.

Joining Metcalfe on the judging panel were Peter McCombie, Master of Wine and top restaurant wine consultant, Robert Joseph, author and wine critic, and Richard Bampfield, Master of Wine and wine consultant.



lush TOASTY vintage *refreshing whites* SMOKY nice smooth wines *blind-taste* **entirely delicious** *STOLE* posh BORDEAUX **easy to drink** **FRUITY** HARMONY **creamy** balanced acidity



Top: Judges Charles Metcalfe and Peter McCombie (second and third left)

## CHOOSING THE WINNERS

Airlines could participate providing they served wine in business or first on mid- or long-haul routes. Each could enter two reds, two whites, a sparkling and a fortified or dessert wine from both their business and first class cellars. They could compete in as many categories as they liked, but to be eligible for the Best Cellar awards, they had to enter at least one red, white and sparkling wine. Every bottle was blind-tasted so no one was influenced by the labels. Our thanks to the judges for all their hard work during the tastings, which took place over two days in December.

Wines were scored out of 100, with award-winning ones rated

between 90 and 97, and anything under 75 deemed undrinkable. To calculate the Best First and Business Class Cellar awards, we took the average mark of an airline's red, white and sparkling wines. For the Best Overall Cellar, we took all scores into account.

## WHAT THE JUDGES SAID

This year saw the return of Robert Joseph to the judging panel, who was one of our expert judges when Cellars in the Sky began in 1985.

"Back then, I don't think airlines thought about how the wine tasted in the air, or with the food they were serving," he says. "So I think what we did in the early years was a good way of getting them to focus on these issues."

He adds: "Some wines we used to taste in the 1980s are no longer affordable. Wines you used to get in business are now in first class, and the first class wines aren't anywhere." Then again, it's not necessarily the priciest wines that taste the best in cabin conditions, and Joseph says the quality has become "immeasurably better".

"This year, it was good to see some really enterprising, unusual wines, and some nice refreshing whites – there were some great Rieslings, which it would be good to see more of," he notes.

How did 2013's entries compare with other years? "Business class

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entries were consistently good, which they haven't always been – whereas the first class reds and whites were full of peaks and troughs," Metcalfe says. "Some wines were absolutely delicious and others not very nice at all – either too old, or just not very good. Then again, the first class fizz was as it is normally – almost entirely delicious – as was the first class fortified/dessert category."

Only one of the winning reds this year was a Bordeaux – a wine with the prestige that premium passengers may expect to see on the menu, but that often doesn't work well in the air because of its high level of tannins.

"What tends to happen at altitude is that tough, tannic wines become more so," Joseph says. "The wine with the château name on it is probably the one that isn't going to taste great. When we're judging, we are looking for simplicity – wines that are easy to drink, and fruity, to fight off the tannins."

Metcalfe echoes this: "We felt it was sad not to have seen more pinot noir or burgundy. These grapes produce nice smooth wines which are very easy-drinking in the air – we had a few, but not as many as we would have liked. Then again, maybe there's a prejudice against serving a pinot noir in a premium cabin because people don't think it's posh enough. And it's difficult to get burgundy in large quantities, so maybe that's another reason."

The challenge remains for airlines to meet passengers' expectations, while choosing wines that actually taste good in the air.



**AIRLINES THAT ENTERED**

- Aer Lingus**
- Air Canada**
- Air France**
- Air New Zealand**
- All Nippon Airways**
- American Airlines**
- Austrian Airlines**
- British Airways**
- Cathay Pacific**
- Delta Air Lines**

- EI Al**
- Emirates**
- Etihad**
- Eva Air**
- Finnair**
- Jetstar**
- KLM**
- Korean Air**
- LAN**
- Malaysia Airlines**
- Oman Air**
- Qantas**
- Qatar Airways**
- Singapore Airlines**
- South African Airways**
- TAM Airlines**
- TAP**
- US Airways**

*Our sincere thanks to all participants*



"Our advice to airlines is that if they want to include Bordeaux, they shouldn't necessarily go for the top wine," Metcalfe says. "If they do, they should go for a lighter vintage, such as a 2007, which is slightly easier-going than some of the vintages surrounding it."

"They could also go for a château's second wine rather than its top, which will be produced in pretty much the same way but deliberately be made so that it is ready to drink at a younger age [thus having less tannins]."

**HOW AIRLINES CHOOSE WINE**

While some carriers want the big names on their lists, others prefer to showcase their national vinification culture. Yair Haidu, El Al's head of wine, says: "Since Israel's wines are lesser known, it is a great opportunity to show people how good they are, and it opens

up passengers' curiosity about the country even before they have landed. Our sunny climate and mountainous landscape produces beautiful wines. The best wines in the world come from the altitudes, which gives grapes a freshness that works well at 30,000 feet."

As with Cellars in the Sky, many airlines blind-taste their wines. Simon Soni, Etihad's head of guest experience, catering, says: "Our wines are selected by a blind tasting panel that includes wine specialists and some of the best certified sommeliers in the UAE. The airline considers a number of key factors including origin, grape variety and vintage in harmony with its menus. Details such as winery reputation and winemaker philosophy are also taken into consideration. Overall, balanced acidity, soft tannins and stronger fruits are important qualities." ▶

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RESULTS

## FIRST CLASS

**BEST FIRST CLASS RED**  
Gold Medal: Emirates



Clarendon Hills Shiraz, 2005, McLaren Vale, Australia  
**Judges said:** "This meaty, Rhône-style wine is rich yet poised, with notes of pepper and spice, good tannins and lots of flavour. Hefty but not OTT; big but classy."  
**Score: 95**

**Silver Medal:**  
British Airways  
Napanook, 2007, Napa Valley, California, US  
**Score: 94**

**Bronze Medal: Emirates**  
Château Cos d'Estournel, 2000, Saint-Estèphe, France  
**Score: 93**

**BEST FIRST CLASS WHITE**  
Gold Medal: Qantas



Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay, 2009, Margaret River, Australia  
**Judges said:** "Youthful, struck-match freshness with zesty tones, lots of tasty oak, and good length. This rich, complex, creamy wine is top class."  
**Score: 96**

**Silver Medal:**  
TAM Airlines  
Dr Bürklin-Wolf Pechstein Grand Cru, 2009, Pfalz, Germany  
**Score: 95**

**Bronze Medal (joint):**  
EI AI  
Yarden Viognier, 2011, Galilee, Golan Heights, Israel  
Malaysia Airlines  
Fritz Haag Brauneberger Juffer Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese, 2011, Mosel, Germany  
**Score: 94**

**BEST FIRST CLASS SPARKLING**  
Gold Medal: Qantas



Taittinger Comtes de Champagne, 2000, France  
**Judges said:** "Sheer class all the way through – really well balanced, with a delicate yeastiness on the nose and palate, real intensity and character – great in the air."  
**Score: 97**

**Silver Medal (joint):**  
Korean Air  
Champagne Laurent-Perrier Alexandra Rosé 1998, France  
Singapore Airlines  
Champagne Dom Pérignon 2004, France  
**Score: 96**

**Bronze Medal:**  
American Airlines  
Champagne Gosset Grande Réserve NV, France  
**Score: 95**

**BEST FIRST CLASS FORTIFIED/DESSERT**  
Gold Medal: EI AI



Yarden Heights Gewurztraminer Late Harvest, 2011, Golan Heights, Galilee, Israel  
**Judges said:** "Unusual aromas, but the palate is seriously sweet and rather scrumptious, with notes of raisin. Extraordinary, lush, and complex. Unbelievably delicious, beautifully balanced, very appropriate for first class."  
**Score: 97**

**Silver Medal: Qantas**  
Seppeltsfield Paramount Rare Tokay NV, Australia  
**Score: 96**

**Bronze Medal (joint):**  
All Nippon Airways  
WJ Graham's 30 Years Tawny Port, Portugal  
TAM Airlines  
Croft Late Bottled Vintage Port, 2005, Portugal  
**Score: 94**

**BEST FIRST CLASS CELLAR**

**Gold Medal:** Qantas  
**Silver Medal:** All Nippon Airways  
**Bronze Medal:** British Airways

**BEST-PRESENTED FIRST CLASS WINE LIST**  
**Gold Medal:** Qatar Airways  
**Silver Medal:** Qantas  
**Bronze Medal:** Singapore Airlines

RESULTS

## BUSINESS CLASS

**BEST BUSINESS CLASS RED**  
Gold Medal: Cathay Pacific



Murray Street White Label Barossa Shiraz, 2008, Australia  
**Judges said:** "A wine of contrasts – leather and spice, ripe but fresh, quite firm yet fine tannins. This toasty oak wine is smooth and welcoming, and would be a pleasure in the air."  
**Score: 95**

**Silver Medal: Qantas**  
Best's Great Western Bin One Shiraz, 2011, Victoria, Australia  
**Score: 93**

**Bronze Medal (joint):**  
Etihad Airways  
Jim Barry, the Lodge Hill Shiraz, 2010, Clare Valley, Australia  
Finnair  
Atteca Vieilles Vignes, 2012, Calatayud, Spain  
**Score: 92**

**BEST BUSINESS CLASS WHITE**  
Gold Medal: Eva Air



Vincent Girardin Chassagne-Montrachet Vieilles Vignes, 2010, Burgundy, France  
**Judges said:** "Understated complexity and richness, very good acidity. Buttery, creamy and ambitiously structured. Still youthful, with promise."  
**Score: 94**

**Silver Medal:**  
Cathay Pacific  
Taylors Clare Valley Chardonnay, 2009, Australia  
**Score: 92**

**Bronze Medal: Air Canada**  
Peter Yealands Sauvignon Blanc, 2013, Marlborough, New Zealand  
**Score: 91**

**BEST BUSINESS CLASS SPARKLING**  
Gold Medal: Eva Air



Champagne Dom Pérignon, 2004, France  
**Judges said:** "Wow! Toasty, smoky and powerful. Scented vegetable notes with freshness, elegance and a real core. Top class."  
**Score: 95**

**Silver Medal (joint):**  
All Nippon Airways, Qantas, Singapore Airlines  
Champagne Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve NV, France  
Emirates  
Champagne Veuve Clicquot Vintage, 2004, France  
**Score: 93**

**Bronze Medal:**  
American Airlines  
Champagne Moutard, Vintage 2008, France  
**Score: 92**

**BEST BUSINESS CLASS FORTIFIED/DESSERT**  
Gold Medal: Emirates



Graham's 20-Year-Old Tawny Port, Portugal  
**Judges said:** "Good flavours – toffeed autumn fruits and walnuts. Creamy and intense with good acidity and a rich balance. Classy and fabulous."  
**Score: 93**

**Silver Medal: Qantas**  
Lillypilly Noble Blend Family Reserve, 2008, New South Wales, Australia  
**Score: 92**

**Bronze Medal:**  
Austrian Airlines  
Kracher Cuvée Beerenauslese, 2010, Neusiedlersee, Austria  
**Score: 90**



### OVERALL

**BEST OVERALL WINE CELLAR**  
**Gold Medal:** Qantas  
**Silver Medal:** Emirates  
**Bronze Medal (joint):** EI AI, Cathay Pacific

**BEST AIRLINE ALLIANCE**  
Oneworld